

Rep. Baird Expresses Concern with Proposed National Parks Policy Changes (February 16, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird, Co-chair of the Congressional National Parks Caucus, today sent the following letter to Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton urging her to preserve our national parks and abandon an unnecessary rewrite of the National Park Service management policies. Thirty-five of Congressman Baird's colleagues signed on to his letter.

"Our national parks are national treasures," said Congressman Baird. "The Park Service's primary goal has always been conservation. These revisions would jeopardize the Park Service's ability to preserve our parks for future generations to enjoy. The revisions also raise serious concerns about the future course of our nation's land management policies."

Congressman Baird and his colleagues oppose proposed revisions that would weaken national park lands protections. They also want to know why the Department of Interior believes another rewrite of the Park Service's management policies is necessary so soon after its recent 2001 revision; the Park Service usually rewrites its management policies about once every 10 years.

The letter was submitted as part of the public comment period on the recently published draft of the proposed Park Service management policies.

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) sent a similar letter to the National Parks Service on February 2.

The Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Norton:

Our predecessors exercised great forethought and wisdom when they approved the National Park Service's Organic Act in 1916. Building upon the Act, Congress has designated hundreds of National Parks, Heritage Areas, Battlefields, the Underground Railroad network, and other important locations that thread together America's history, achievements, and natural wonders. The current Park Service management policies have been a part of this record of success. Today, National Parks are beloved by Americans. In 2004 alone there were more than 300 million total visits to the National Park System.

The proposed revisions to the Park Service management policies have raised some specific concerns. As you know, the management policies serve as a guide for park managers to make decisions that are consistent with congressional intent for the park system and each individual park unit. The revised policies fail to reflect clearly the overarching goal given to the Park Service by Congress. Of particular concern:

The paramount responsibility of the Park Service, last reinforced by the 2001 Park Service management policies, is to preserve park resources so that future generations may enjoy them as we do today. The proposed revisions deemphasize preservation in favor of elevating the importance of current use. This makes the Park Service's mission less clear and departs from the longstanding intent of Congress and traditions of Park Service management. The Park Service's historic emphasis on conservation should be retained.

Currently, clear skies and natural soundscapes are defined as physical resources included in the Park Service's mission. The proposed revisions degrade their importance to associated characteristics. That change demonstrates a shift in the value the Park Service will place on mitigating air and noise pollution.

The current management policies currently present a goal for the Park Service to restore disrupted components to their natural conditions. The proposed revisions alter this to add qualifications about human presence. Once again, this change will devalue the importance of natural restoration.

In sum, Congress has taken previous steps to clarify that when Park managers face decisions regarding air pollution, noise, wilderness protection, and whether to allow specific recreational and commercial activities, they must always err on the side of preserving park resources. The revised policies diminish and distort this prioritized mission by altering conservation-oriented language and replacing it with more permissive instructions. To put it simply, the revised policies confuse the mission of the Park Service.

In addition, it should be noted that it has been the historic practice of the Park Service to rewrite management practices decennially. In such periodic efforts, the Park Service leadership engaged staff at all levels to ensure professional input from managers intimately familiar with issues and challenges confronting the parks. The current proposed revisions are being made just five years after the most recent update. The timeframe has also been sharply abbreviated from past practice, as the process that produced the current draft lasted just two months. This is a hurried timeframe in which to recast policies that will guide stewardship of many of the nation's most cherished places, compared to previous efforts which have taken several years of analysis, scoping, and comment.

National Parks are irreplaceable treasures. It is our responsibility to pass them on to future generations with pride and great care as our predecessors did for us. The existing management policies will ensure that this remains the primary mission of the National Park Service. We ask that you withdraw the proposed revisions.

Sincerely,

Brian Baird

Nancy Pelosi

Sam Farr

Raï¿½l Grijalva

Rush Holt

Vic Snyder

Chris Van Hollen

Tom Udall

Mark Udall

Pete Stark

Ed Case

William Delahunt

Bob Filner

Ed Markey

George Miller

Ellen Tauscher

Major Owens

Jay Inslee

Barbara Lee

Allyson Schwartz

Michael McNulty

Ben Chandler

Doris Matsui

Robert Andrews

Barney Frank

Dale Kildee

Carolyn Maloney

Betty McCollum

Ron Kind

Maurice Hinchey

Earl Blumenauer

Michael Honda

Michael Michaud

Tammy Baldwin

Jim McDermott

Lynn Woolsey

###